

Rose Maher, cropping, Meerlieu

I have always had a close affinity with agriculture.

My parents started their married life on their own farm and my father worked in the timber industry as well to realise their dream.

They moved on through a succession of employment options and then went into partnership on a dairy farm with my paternal grandfather when I was about seven, which was a strategic mistake.

However when I was eight, I had the satisfaction of finishing the milking by myself. When my parents came back to the shed my mother burst into tears, much to my consternation, and dad swept me up in his arms with glowing commendations for my efforts.

I also drove the tractor, helped feed the pigs, assisted with strip grazing, planting and, best of all, was allowed to take dad's lunch over to the back paddock by myself. I had my first pony at this time.

After a few shifts to different farms and different jobs for dad, we moved back to Swan Reach to our own bush block (farm) when I was 10 and my greatest pleasure was still being dad's shadow. Dad carted logs at this stage for off-farm income and my mother grew the majority of our food. We had chooks, pigs, milking cows, 'killer' sheep and no electricity. For a child it was a great life.

Socially we visited friends, read aloud, told stories, shared family debate and conversation, rode horses and bikes and celebrated with extended family. The best book our mother read aloud was *Robbery Under Arms*.

My mother and her family by association gave us a broad 'classical' education and dad gave us the practical experience and the confidence to explore our environment fully.

We were a large family and the key message was commitment and cooperation lead to success and that there should be lots of laughter along the way.

We did not really 'fit' with formal schooling, home was much more exciting.

I was bored with school by 16 and, after some strategic maneuvering, I completed Year 11 and ventured out to experience the adult world as a trainee nurse.

My first partner was from a beef farm and we shared accommodation and farm tasks with his parents.

For the women these mainly revolved around the traditional female roles and we were only called on for assistance during key farm activities requiring extra labour.

Women had no real authority in the agricultural decision-making process.

My partner and I then went off to explore Australia and returned with two children and no desire to be with one another any more.

I returned to school as a mature-age student and subsequently went to university. (Thank you Gough Whitlam.)

I met my second partner during my third year at university when I was an ardent feminist. He was a partner in a mixed grazing property at Meerlieu and so I came 'home' again.

Once again I was involved on the periphery of farming, as casual labour when required, but my career was in education and disability services.

I saw my work role as empowering people who were disadvantaged and developed a diverse range of skill sets to facilitate this role.

At this stage in my life I was known to get frustrated by discussions of the weather.

However I now had an understanding of sheep, shearing sheds, stock transports, crops, pastures and a formal farming partnership to add to my previous agricultural experience.

I retired and had a wonderful time doing nothing of significance and then resting afterwards.

One day as I was leisurely enjoying brunch in the sun, still wrapped in my dressing gown a 'friend' dropped in, slapped an advertisement on the table and said, 'We think you should apply for this.'

I did and became the Gippsland Branch Coordinator for Southern Farming Systems (SFS).

My whole life changed.

SFS is a farmer-driven, research and extension organisation focusing on cereal production in the high-rainfall zones.

I went on a roller-coaster learning curve ...whoopee!

Gippsland trials

Cereal varieties, trial layouts, plant counts, tiller counts, cereal growth stages, plant agronomy, trial results, variety cuts, grazing cuts, grain quality, Dm/Ha, harvest results, reports, fertiliser use, pest management, weed management, fungicides and in crop treatments, soil health and of course farmers, farmers everywhere.

I now understood why water use efficiency was so important.

My year 11 chemistry and biology finally had direct relevance to my work.

I knew I was hooked when I found myself and my partner at the kitchen bench, both with our own copy of the SFS trial results book, researching the best cereal variety to sow for a winter feed wedge.

I loved it and wished that I could have started working in the field of sustainable agriculture sooner.

Extension

SFS also promotes better practice in the cereal cropping and forage industry linked to the triple bottom line, profit, family and environment.

Gippsland has had events focusing on no-till/ minimum-till, direct drilling, alternative fertilisers, targeted chemical use, integrated weed and pest management, grain storage, chemical use, stubble retention, over sowing cereals, grain and graze, row spacing, seeding rates, water use efficiency, and a two-year project focusing on soil health.

There was also dedicated training in soil biology, climate change, cereal agronomy and harvester operations. Yes, I am trained to operate a combine harvester.

SFS Gippsland's first major project was 'Profitable and sustainable farming on the red gum plains' funded by the National Landcare Programme.

We focused on the truism: healthy soil, healthy plants, healthy animals, healthy food.

SFS members illustrated the cooperative partnership approach and shared their successes and failures with each other and the wider agricultural community.

SFS was given the Community Partnerships Award by the East Gippsland Landcare Network.

Lou and I were both involved in the soil project and were able to implement soil improvement plans on our own property.

We had good outcomes: silos of grain, fantastic conserved fodder, increased ground cover, stock going forward and best of all increases in the fertility and biological activity of the paddocks we targeted in the soil improvement plans. We have also had some poor outcomes, but overall the introduction of cereal cropping into our farming system has given us greater flexibility and a more sustainable enterprise.

We now spend a lot of time walking, talking and examining pastures and crops, celebrating and planning the next steps in our farm management together.

We have now moved into pasture cropping which is direct-drilling cereals into perennial pasture to take advantage of rainfall across the year with a mixture of summer and winter active species for grazing and ground cover all year.

The process also increases the biodiversity of perennial plants, insects and soil biology and allows you greater flexibility in response to the season.

Personally

I do not think you can achieve success without passion and commitment.

My success working for SFS would not have occurred without cooperative partnerships with SFS members and the wider agricultural community. I am amazed by the complexities of farming systems and the skills farmers bring to the management of their farming businesses.

I have met a wonderful group of generous people and had great leaders.

One of the best things about my work with SFS has been the opportunities that I have been able to access for continued learning.

I have had a fascinating time expanding my knowledge and skills.

I have explored the Food Web with Elaine Ingham, shared the reflections of Christine Jones, undertaken whole farm planning, pasture cropping, regenerative farming and holistic farming courses and attended conferences, workshops and forums promoting SFS.

The most challenging was succession planning ... and it still is.

The best experience of all was the 'Gippsland future food and fibre leadership course'.

I believe in lifelong learning and encourage everybody to go out and learn so that you can be actively involved in the sustainable future of your agricultural enterprise.

It is such fun.

The future

I have finished up with Southern Farming Systems- if you want to know more about the group you can contact the new coordinator Nikki Hellyer n.hellyer@homail.com or go to the Southern Farming Systems website www.sfs.org.au

An informative study on the website is 'An expanded grain and cereal conserved fodder industry in Gippsland'.

My partner and I are currently implementing a regenerative farming model which includes pasture cropping.

My first major challenge to implement a regenerative farming system was to run my horses with the cattle and sheep. On our 200 acre house block we now have one big mob of sheep, cattle and a trio of horses rotationally grazing and hopefully not coming back to the paddock until at least the five-leaf stage. The challenge is to adopt these sustainable farming practices across the whole property.

'Shivers down my backbone'. I still have a tendency to start the day with brunch